

Who Cares for the Kids? Parenting and Caregiving in Disney Films

Jeanne Holcomb, Kenzie Latham, and Daniel Fernandez-Baca

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Holcomb, J., Latham, K., & Fernandez-Baca, D. (2015). Who Cares for the Kids? Caregiving and Parenting in Disney Films. *Journal of Family Issues*, 36(14), 1957–1981. <http://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X13511250>

Abstract

Disney is recognized as producing powerful cultural products that make major contributions to many forms of children's media. While it has been suggested that mothers are marginalized in Disney films, there has been no extensive research exploring the pathways of marginalization and contexts of marginalized mothers. Furthermore, research examining parenting more generally including mothers, fathers, and other-parents has been neglected in the current literature. This study explores narrative subtexts surrounding mothers by systematically examining feature length, animated Disney films. A sample of 15 films was analyzed; the films were purposefully sampled using specific family-related criteria. Results indicate that mothers are marginalized either through their absence or their relatively minor roles, and fathers and other-parents are a significant part of many of the films. This is interesting given a wider cultural context that emphasizes biological mothers as key nurturers, and disconnect between parenting in Disney films and societal context is discussed.

Keywords

parenting, fathering, mothering, Disney, other-parent

Introduction

Disney is a powerful and influential storyteller in the lives of children across the world, yet it has been noted by researchers that biological mothers are generally missing in Disney films (Brydon, 2009). It is interesting to note that biological mothers are largely absent, given the cultural emphasis placed on biological mothers as primarily responsible for the raising of children. If biological mothers are not the ones parenting young figures in Disney films, who is? This study examines fifteen animated Disney films and explores themes related to caregiving behaviors and the characters who engage in caregiving. The term parenting is employed throughout this research to describe nurturing and caregiving behavior regardless of gender or relation to the child/adolescent. Whereas prior research, reflecting dominant cultural beliefs, has typically viewed parenting as exclusively mothering, more recently a shift toward understanding fathering or parenting more broadly has taken root in both research and the media (Adamsons & Buehler, 2007; Doucet, 2006; Lamb, 2000; Saunderland, 2006). Disney has actively shaped their public persona to be family-orientated and the epitome of childhood innocence—Disney and the family are now ubiquitous in the United States (US) and globally (Giroux & Pollock, 2010). Given the prevailing media influence of Disney and the focus on the family, Disney has immense potential to shape cultural notions of parenting, family, and gender roles; therefore, it is necessary to systematically investigate these themes and relate them to the broader family and media literature. As there continues to be increased acceptance of the diversity with family forms and caregiving patterns, such as increases in dual-earner households, single mothers and fathers, same-sex parenting, and grandparent caregivers, it is imperative to understand how media frames caregiving and the acceptability of various caregivers. Engaging in this analysis allows for deeper understanding of how family patterns are represented in media and can offer insight of how media privileges some relationships while marginalizing others. This information can contribute to media literacy efforts and broader efforts to spread information about diversity in families and the ways in which some family forms are normalized.

Literature Review

Disney and the Family

The Disney brand is synonymous with family entertainment. Films emblazoned with the Disney name are often stocked in the “Family” section of movie retailers and are easily recognizable. This association is due, in no small part, to their long history of closely regulated family focused productions starting with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* in 1937. In their book, *Dazzled by Disney*, Wasko, Phillips and Meehan (2001) conduct a study they called “The Global Disney Audience Project (GDAP),” and among their findings they demonstrated that the word “family” was used by over 80% of participants to describe Disney media. Disney has done well to protect its image as a purveyor of family content. By creating multiple banners, under which they could release more adult material, The Walt Disney Company was able to maintain the association of “family-friendly” entertainment with the Disney name (Best & Lowney, 2009).

Disney has been the target of social critique from a wide range of social groups over the years for various reasons. While conservatives have attacked Disney for distributing “morally questionable” material through its other production label, progressives suggest that Disney does not do enough to promote social equality among various minority groups within their films, and academics target Disney as providing an inauthentic experience by overly sanitizing their products (Best & Lowney, 2009). However despite these objections, of the top 5 major media conglomerates in the United States (including News Corp., Time Warner, Viacom and CBS), The Walt Disney Company tops the 2010 Fortune 500 rankings as the conglomerate with the most profit and revenue generated (Fortune 500, 2010). Their market saturation includes films, television channels, radio stations, print media, and a multitude of consumer products recognizable on the shelves and hangers of most popular retail stores. Positive association with the Disney brand is not only intended for children but also adolescents and adults as Disney’s nostalgic reminders of innocence and idealized representation of life are actively marketed to people of all ages (Wasko, 2001).

While most scholars agree that Disney's media presence is powerful and prolific, there is relatively limited empirical research examining Disney's portrayals of family; however, a noteworthy exception demonstrated a marginalization of mothers. Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, and Lund (2003) investigated depictions and formations of couples in 26 full-length featured Disney films, and revealed four overarching themes including the marginalization of mothers and elevation of fathers. Additionally, the authors describe couple relationships as being characterized as having "gender-based power differentials" (Tanner et al., 2003, p. 355). Research investigating gender roles in Disney films is much more available. For example, Towbin et al. (2003) observed persisting gender, race, and cultural stereotypes in 26 full-length featured Disney films. The authors noted some positive portrayals of gender where the main character did not adhere to the stereotypical gender role, but overall gender roles, especially for women, had remained essentially the same since *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011; Towbin et al., 2003). Other research investigating representations of family and children in Disney films have found that the majority of Disney child/adolescent characters had been mistreated by family members (Hubka, Hovdestad, & Tonmyr, 2009). Gender depictions in Disney films appear to be well documented with the *Disney Princess* line of products being an important vein of Disney and gender research (see England, Descartes, & Collier-Meek, 2011); however, critical assessments of parenting and family formations have been on the margins of this research.

Mothering, Fathering, and Parenting

Significant cultural shifts have influenced continual changes with regards to family composition and parenting behaviors. For instance, compared to the 1960s, average family size has decreased, more births are to unmarried women, more children are experiencing divorce, and more married mothers are working (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Attitudes toward appropriate parenting behavior have shifted; according to the Families and Work Institute, in 2008, 39% of employees reported agreeing that it is better if men earn the money and women take care of the home and children, which is a decline from

64% in 1977 (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2009). Ideology surrounding both mothering and fathering behaviors has undergone significant shifts, although mothers are still responsible for more daily caregiving activities.

Current ideologies for parenting maintain that mothers are primarily responsible for caring for children; Hays suggests that “by the second half of the nineteenth century, childrearing was synonymous with mothering” (Hays, 1996, p. 29). Hays identifies intensive mothering as the dominant cultural model for mothering. This ideology maintains that mothers should be primarily responsible for caregiving and that caregiving should be costly, labor-intensive, informed by experts, and centered on the child’s needs (Hays, 1996). Ideals of good mothering have shifted to include work (Gerson, 2010), but normative expectations still place primary caregiving responsibilities on mothers (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Additionally, there is continued discourse associated with “mommy wars” and lingering questions about whether children suffer negative consequences if their mothers work.

While mothering ideology has shifted somewhat to include breadwinning, expectations for fathers to be more involved with their children have also increased (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). The nurturing model of fathering emerged beginning in the 1970s and emphasized that fathers should be active, nurturing parents who are involved in the day-to-day activities of caring for their children (Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2000). The new father ideal expects fathers to care for and be emotionally close with their children (Messner, 1993), but research indicates that breadwinning continues to carry upmost importance. For example, Lamb (2000) categorizes father involvement as engaged, accessible, or responsible. Traditionally, fathers have been more heavily involved in responsibility through breadwinning, while less responsible for day-to-day caregiving decisions. Likewise, Townsend (2002) suggests that fatherhood is comprised of four key elements: emotional closeness, provision, protection, and endowment, but that provision tends to carry the most significance for most fathers. Many men equate being a good father with being able to financially provide for their children, even though this oftentimes creates tension between dedications to paid employment and desires to be more involved in their children’s lives (Townsend, 2002).

These dominant cultural ideologies manifest themselves in parents' behaviors in child rearing and paid labor. Married fathers are spending more time with their children, but mothers continue to spend more time with children than fathers (Yoshida, 2012). For instance, in 1977, fathers spent about two hours with their children on workdays, whereas this increased to three hours in 2008. Mothers' hours spent with children during the same time period remained constant at close to four hours (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2009). Additionally, a gender gap in specific care activities persists. For instance, fathers tend to engage more in play activities while activities like diapering and bathing are primarily the responsibility of mothers (Yoshida, 2012). Livingston and Parker (2011) suggest that the involved father is only one side of the changing role of fathers; while some fathers are spending more time with children, more fathers are also living apart from their children, resulting in 27% of children living apart from their father in 2010.

With regards to paid labor, more fathers of young children are employed than mothers, although mothers have increased time spent in paid labor. In 2011, approximately seventy percent of mothers with children under the age of eighteen were in the labor force, as were sixty-four percent of mothers with children under six years of age (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). This is a significant increase since 1950, when about twenty percent of married women were in the labor force (Cohany & Sok, 2007). Thus, while men have become more involved in childcare and housework and women have become more involved in paid labor outside the home, gaps remain in which men are more involved in paid labor outside the home and women are more involved housework and childcare. These gaps tend to be magnified at particular life transitions; when a couple has children, mothers are more likely to reduce paid employment while fathers often increase hours in paid employment. When hours of paid and unpaid labor are combined, many mothers and fathers are working approximately the same number of hours (Coltrane, 2000).

Social science research and cultural norms tend to focus primarily on caregiving responsibilities and biological parents. However, it is also important to consider social parents, fictive kin, and othermothers. Discourse of social parenting has arisen primarily from two areas: social fathers in low-

income households and gay and lesbian parenting. With twenty-seven percent of children living away from their fathers, there is space for children to have relationships with men who act like a father, although they are not a biological father and may not have a legal connection (Jayakody & Kalil, 2002). Social parenting is also apparent in some same-sex couples; in these cases, the couple takes on primary parenting responsibilities while a third parent, often a close friend of the opposite sex, engages in social parenting (Althouse, 2008). Relatedly, fictive kin refers to family-like relationships and has been studied especially in immigrant groups, African American families, and gay and lesbian families (Ebaugh & Curry, 2000). Othermothers are women who are not the biological mother of a child but yet have a significant role in that child's upbringing (Collins, 1994). Sometimes othermothers could be aunts, godmothers, close friends of the mother, or neighbors. The concepts of social parents, fictive kin, and othermothers sensitize us to the fact that parenting is rarely a sole endeavor by the biological parent(s); many families develop networks of people involved in the care for children.

In addition to recognizing various actors who engage in parenting behaviors, it is also important to consider that patterns of family formation and parenting norms are based on white, middle-class family ideals. For instance, the option of being a stay-at-home mom was and continues to be available only to those who could afford it, which typically excludes many poorer families, as well as many single mothers. There could also be different meanings associated with work for different racial groups; for instance, Collins (1994) suggests that paid employment has been a central part of mothering for African American mothers. Additionally, data indicates that African American mothers return to work more quickly after the birth of a child. In 2008, 65% of black mothers were in the workforce within the first nine months of having a child, whereas the rate for white mothers was 61%, and the rate for Hispanic and Asian mothers was closer to 50%. In addition to race, marital status impacts work, as cohabiting and single mothers are more likely to be working within nine months postpartum than married women. As could be expected, mothers who were married, had more than a bachelor's degree, and were older than thirty were less likely to be working at two months after the birth (Han, Ruhm, Waldfogel, & Washbrook, 2008).

Race and social class are also associated with patterns of family formation and parenting behaviors. For example, there is a growing divide in patterns of marriage between those who have a college education and those who do not. In 2008, 64% of those with a college education were married, compared to 48% of those with a high school diploma or less. Likewise, while 41% of births are to unmarried women, among black women, 72% of births are to those who are unmarried, while 29% of births among white women are to those who are unmarried. In addition to examining how race, social class, and marital status impact parental employment, other research has examined the impact that social class has on parenting behaviors, such as involvement in children's education or how money is used within the family (Laureau, 2003; Pugh, 2009). The key point here is that normative models of intensive mothering and involved fatherhood are largely based on middle-class, heterosexual, married-couple ideals, despite research that indicates a much greater variety in lived experience.

This research seeks to combine two areas of sociological study – media analysis of Disney films and research suggesting mothers continue to engage in more caregiving, despite significant changes that have occurred. Prior research has documented the marginalization of mothers in Disney films (Tanner, Haddock, Zimmerman, & Lund, 2003; Brydon, 2009) and given the historical cultural emphasis placed on mothers as caregivers and fathers as breadwinners, it is astonishing how far Disney deviates from these gendered parenting behaviors. This is particularly interesting when considering other research has highlighted the stereotypical gender roles of Disney characters in past and contemporary films. Family and media scholars underscore the potential for Disney to shape cultural expectations of gender roles, which include notions of parenting and family. The purpose of this project is to explore characters that engage in parenting behaviors in full-length Disney animated feature films. Key questions focus on the prominence of biological mother and father figures, parenting behaviors included in the films, and the inclusion of social parents.

Data and Method

Film Selection

Films for this study were purposefully sampled; the sampling criteria included films that featured children or adolescents as main characters and/or portray significant family interaction throughout the film. The film population was defined as full-length animated feature films, released in theaters. The focus was on hand-drawn films sometimes referred to as “Disney Classics” or “Disney Masterpieces.” Robinson, Callister, Magoffin, and Moore (2007) identified 34 films that were “original animated features made entirely by Disney and released in theaters.” Using the list provided by Robinson et al. (2007) with the addition of the most recent hand-drawn film, *The Princess and The Frog*, the population for this analysis was 35 films. Of those 35 films, 15 films (see Table 1) were purposefully sampled based on the above mentioned criteria (i.e., age of the character and the extent of family interaction). Children and family interaction were identified using the following conditions: 1) birth included in film; 2) story began with young child; 3) specific age is mentioned younger than 18 years old; 4) parental figures were part of the film. The 15 films ranged from the first Disney full-length animated film, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), to the most recent full-length animated film, *The Princess and the Frog* (2009)—spanning over seven decades. Although it could be commented that the older Disney films are irrelevant, Disney films continue to be powerful cultural storytellers; when *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* was released in 2001 as part of the platinum edition DVD series, one million copies were sold in the first day (Nash Information Services, 2012). Between the years of 2007 and 2012, every time a Disney Platinum or Diamond DVD collection was released, it was been among the thirty top-selling DVDs that year (Nash Information Services, 2012). Thus, while some of the original release dates may seem to undermine the relevance of these films, they remain strongly embedded in cultural presentations of family.

Analytic Strategy

This research utilized a defined population as well as developed research questions; therefore, we elected to use qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) to uncover themes about Disney

parenting. A template of guided questions was created prior to viewing films which included questions about the adolescent main character, mother and father figures, and family interaction (for detailed description see Appendix 1). Using this template we sought to answer several questions:

- Q1: How often are mothers/fathers and othermothers/otherfathers present and how prominently are they featured?
- Q2: How does the portrayal of the mother figure compare to that of the father figure?
- Q3: What roles do non-biological parents or othermothers and otherfathers occupy?
- Q4: How is parenting behavior portrayed in the family interactions during the film?

The first part of the analysis included independently observing three films to verify inter-rater reliability. These three films (i.e., *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *The Jungle Book*, and *The Princess and the Frog*) were watched and analyzed by all three authors and comprised 20% of the sample. These specific films were chosen because of their release dates—the first release, most recent release, and approximate midpoint of the sample. For the three films that were chosen for inter-rater reliability, the authors' analyses were extremely similar for each guided question. There were only minor discrepancies that related to sub-characters or sub-plots where an author discussed an additional parental reference in the film. For example, one of the authors included a reference made in *The Jungle Book* where the vultures asked Mowgli (the main character): "Haven't you got a mother or father?" to which he responded, "No. Nobody wants me." After reviewing the notes the authors discussed being more mindful of other parental references throughout the films, including those made by more minor characters. Key terms, such as positive and negative portrayals of parent figures were also defined in discussion. For instance, positive presence was generally defined as engaging in behaviors that supported and benefited the child character, whereas negative was defined as engaging in behaviors more detrimental to the child character. Mother and father figures were also defined as being of the same type of animal as the child; for instance Mrs. Potts is included in this analysis as an other-mother, not as a mother. Despite her motherly behaviors suggesting she is a human mother, in most of the film, her appearance is that of a teapot. Characters that behave in motherly ways, but are not of the same type of figure, are discussed as other mothers. The second part of the analysis proceeded after verifying inter-

rater reliability, and the remaining films were split evenly among the three authors for a total of four films each. After compiling notes on all films, the authors coded the notes and discovered key themes related to parental figures and family interaction.

Results

Mother and Father Figure Appearances

Table 2 presents a summary of appearances of mother and father figures in the sample films. Two films (*The Jungle Book* and *Aladdin*) did not include a biological or adoptive parental figure. Six films (i.e., *Dumbo*, *Bambi*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Lion King*, *Mulan*, and *The Princess and the Frog*) had the biological mother of the main character make at least one appearance on screen. All of the films that included a biological mother character portrayed her in a positive light and she was generally shown nurturing the main character. For example, Dumbo's mother cradles and sings to Dumbo while in *The Lion King*, Simba's mother bathes young Simba. Although the biological mothers were represented in a positive manner, the biological mothers often had a very limited role in the film and short screen time. Five of the six (83%) films depicting biological mothers also depicted biological fathers (*Bambi*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Lion King*, *Mulan*, and *The Princess and the Frog*). *Dumbo* is the only film to include a biological mother without a biological father (although it is implied there are no biological fathers but rather storks). Three films (*The Little Mermaid*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and *Pocahontas*) portray the biological father without the biological mother. In both *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast*, there is no mention of a biological mother even though a biological father is present. Similar to depictions of biological mothers, biological fathers were represented in a positive light; however, biological fathers tended to have a more authoritarian relationship with the main character in which the relationship focused on obedience to a father's authority. To illustrate, Ariel's father in *The Little Mermaid* was depicted as very caring yet very strict, such as his rules about not going to the ocean surface, his dismay at her continued collection of human artifacts, and his use of voice and punishment to try to get her to obey his

rules. A similar “caring but tough” depiction of a father-daughter relationship is seen in *Mulan* and *Pocahontas*.

Three films (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella* and *Lilo and Stitch*) presented step or adoptive mothers. *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* featured only one parental figure, Snow White’s step mother, who is portrayed as evil and threatened by her step daughter. A similar portrayal of the “evil step mother” is seen in *Cinderella*. In *Cinderella*, there is a brief mention of Cinderella’s father; however, he dies leaving the step mother as the main parental figure. *Lilo and Stitch* is the only film to represent an adoptive mother who is still biologically related to the main character (originally a sister). Additionally, *The Sword and the Stone* was the only film to depict an adoptive (foster) father; however, the adoptive father in *The Sword and the Stone* was portrayed negatively whereas the adoptive mother in *Lilo and Stitch* was portrayed positively.

In *The Sword and the Stone*, the adoptive father figure, Ector, takes Wart in and cares for him. On the one hand, it is positive that Ector gives Wart a home; however, Wart is not treated well. To illustrate, Wart is responsible for all of the chores and constantly receives demerits that translated into extra work hours. In one scene, Ector says, “You should be grateful I’m taking care of you, so be appreciative of what you have.” Wart is treated more as a servant than a son, which is similar to the relationship seen in *Cinderella* between Cinderella and her step mother. On the other hand, family is a central theme in *Lilo and Stitch* —at the beginning of the film the parents are dead and the older sister, Nani, has become the guardian of the younger sister, Lilo. The audience sees the struggles related to a shifting relationship from sister to mother. There are very tender moments in which Nani engages in comforting behavior (e.g. singing to Lilo) as well as difficult moments within their relationship (e.g., Nani and Lilo fighting).

Comparing Mothers and Fathers

Four films (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Dumbo*, *Cinderella*, and *Lilo and Stitch*) (see Table 3) had mothers, including step/adoptive, playing a more central role than fathers. Of those four films, two films (*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* and *Cinderella*) showed mother figures in a negative

light. Two out of 15 films (*Dumbo* and *Lilo and Stitch*) portrayed mothers in a positive light and featured a mother figure prominently or did not highlight the role of the father. *Dumbo* featured the biological mother; however, her role was not the central to the movie. In *Dumbo*, there is no mention of the biological father and Dumbo is shown to be brought by a stork suggesting that it is natural for Mrs. Jumbo and other animals to be single parents. *Lilo and Stitch* featured an adoptive mother figure and that relationship was central. Of the fifteen films analyzed, none of them included a positive portrayal of a biological mother who was central to the film and featured more centrally than the father character.

The films that depicted both mother and father figures tended to emphasize the role of the father over the mother (e.g., *Bambi*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Lion King*, *Mulan*, and *The Princess and the Frog*). In the film *Bambi*, mothers and fathers are represented in this film; however, the mothers are shown tending to the children, protecting them, and teaching them. The mothers are very nurturing and represent stereotypical gender roles. The fathers in the film are revered although they take a minimal part in raising the children. An example of this is the relationship between the mother rabbit and Thumper; Mrs. Rabbit is always seen caring for her children, yet when Thumper gets in trouble his mother defers to a father figure that is never shown. *Sleeping Beauty*'s father does not have a central role in relation to onscreen time, but has a more active caregiving role than the mother's role as he is seen betrothing his daughter to his friend's son when they are still children. *Sleeping Beauty* features othermothers (i.e., fairy godmothers), and their role is the most significant in terms of parental figures. In *The Lion King*, compared to the mother, the father is more involved and has more screen time; Simba's mother only has three speaking scenes and is seen bathing Simba, in contrast to Simba's extended interactions with his father learning to hunt and touring the land. After the father's death, the father continues to play a more central role in the form of connection to the main character as a spirit than the living mother. Similarly, *Mulan*'s father is more prominent and is seen as both nurturing and tough. The father has more meaningful screen time and interaction with Mulan compared to the mother. Finally, *The Princess and the Frog* depicts both a mother and father, but the father plays a more important role in the main character's development and plot. Both Tiana (the main character) and her father shared a passion for

food and sharing food with others. Although Tiana's mother is present throughout the film, the emphasis is on the effect of the father-daughter relationship. Tiana's mother bluntly says, "You're your father's daughter, that's for sure."

The Other Parents and Fairy Godmothers

While sociological research on family has recognized othermothers, social parents, and more broadly, fictive kin, dominant cultural models of parenting remain fixed primarily on biological mothers and fathers. Othermothers and fictive kin continue to be more recognized among minority and poorer families, and the research and theory on motherhood has been critiqued for focusing too much on white, middle-class families and neglecting family nuances impacted by race and class (Collins, 1994). In the Disney films included in this project, there is a fascinating combination of primarily white main characters and other-parent figures. In the media, this definition extends to figures that have otherworldly powers whether they be magical or spiritual, such as fairy godmothers, genies or spirit guides. This discussion highlights the significance of other-parents to the main characters of the films included in this analysis.

As mentioned above, in the 15 films included, there was a remarkable lack of biological mothers who were positive in nature and significant in the plot and screen time. *Dumbo* is the only positive portrayal of a mother figure who had prominence over the father figure, but she still had a relatively minor role in terms of screen time and speaking parts; there were no films that included positive, biological mothers who were significant in terms of plot and screen time. In their absence, and in the absence of strong father figures, there was space for othermothers, or more broadly, other-parents. If the children were not cared for by their mothers or their fathers, and if most step-parents are presented in negative ways, who is helping the children as they mature into adults? Remarkably, it is other, mostly non-biologically related characters who act as other-parents. *Bambi* and *Snow White* were the only two films included in the analysis in which there was no other-parent character. *Lilo and Stitch* varies slightly from the films discussed below in that the parenting figure is an older sister. It remains the case that the

biological mother is not present, but this is the only film where the other-parent is biologically related to the child or young adult.

Perhaps the most noticeable other-parent figures in Disney films are the fairy godmothers and other imagined characters. Three of the 13 films that included other-parents have a make-believe character that engages in some of the tasks we typically expect parents to do. When Cinderella's stepmother does not intervene as the stepsisters ruin her ball dress, her fairy godmother appears. With a wave of her wand, she saves the night by transforming her torn dress into a new dress, the dog into a horse, and a pumpkin into a coach. *Sleeping Beauty* also portrays fairy godmothers, as Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather protect Aurora from her fate at the hands of Malificent. Although not a fairy, the Genie in *Aladdin* is a make-believe character who protects Aladdin. Although he is required to do what he is asked to do, Aladdin and Genie develop a special relationship in which the Genie cares for Aladdin and even saves his life when Jafar has Aladdin thrown into the water.

Two other films, *The Princess and the Frog* and *The Sword in the Stone*, present an older character that cares for and offers advice to the younger main characters. In *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana and Naveene travel to see Mamma Odie, a voodoo queen, for her advice about the spell they are under. Additionally, in *The Sword in the Stone*, Merlin is an older magician who mentors the to-be King Arthur. He tries to teach the young boy about the world in hopes that these lessons will help inform his decisions as King. Both Mamma Odie and Merlin act as guides for younger characters who are searching for their place in the world.

In addition to fairy godmothers and older other-parents, other-parent figures include animal characters, and six of the films included animals who acted as caregivers and mentors. Examples include Mushu, the dragon who is sent by the ancestors to protect Mulan, and Timothy, the mouse in *Dumbo* who often offers advice, seeks to protect, and otherwise cares for Dumbo. In *The Little Mermaid*, Sebastian tries to keep Ariel safe and protect her from harm, and in *The Sword in the Stone*, Merlin's owl, Archimedes, also watches over Wart when he saves him from the big fish and helps him learn how to fly. Bagderha and Baloo both act as parental figures to Mowgli in *The Jungle Book*. Bagderha initially takes

him to a place where he could survive and always kept tabs on how he was doing. Bagderha always tried to protect him and went running when Baloo called for him. It seemed that whenever Mowgli was in trouble, Bagderha was not far behind. Additionally, Baloo used ownership language (my boy, my cub) and fought off the main antagonist in the end. In *The Lion King*, Timon, Pumba, and Rafiki act in some ways as other-parents. In the absence of parents, Timon and Pumba teach Simba what to eat and how to live in a place he is not used to, and Rafiki gives Simba advice.

Less significant than animal figures, two films present typically non-living objects as motherly figures. For instance, in *Beauty and the Beast*, Mrs. Potts (a teapot) acts as a mother figure to Belle to some extent. Although Mrs. Potts is more concerned with her own son, Chip, and with reversing the spell, she does offer guidance and advice to Belle and tries to help her adjust to life in the castle. Mrs. Potts also acts as a mother-figure toward the Beast in that she teaches him appropriate actions. *Pocahontas* offers another example in the character of Mother Willow, a willow tree, who Pocahontas turns to for advice.

While very few of the other-parent characters are seen in day-to-day caregiving activities, they are portrayed as helping young characters at pivotal moments, either in material ways (helping Cinderella with her dress) or in dispensing advice (Mother Willow). Many of the other-parent figures are presented as teachers of life lessons and as protectors keeping the main characters from harm. These characters highlight how children are not raised solely by isolated nuclear families. Rather, in the absence of biological parents, and sometimes even when biological parents are present, these other-parent characters often act as important mentors and protectors of the children and young adults. Thus, despite the current dominant cultural parenting ideology that places almost exclusive emphasis on biological parents, Disney's parenting narrative illustrates the significant role of other-parent figures.

Parenting Behaviors

In addition to comparing the prominence of mothers and fathers and exploring other-parent figures, another key research question explored what parenting behaviors were portrayed in the films.

Surprisingly, mothering and fathering behaviors in Disney films are less gender-specific than sociological research suggests parenting behaviors are in real life. For instance, fathers are not necessarily shown as breadwinners, and female characters are just as likely to be in a protective type role as male characters. While there has been discussion of separating parenting from a gender-based definition, it remains the case that people tend to associate parenting with mothers (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson, 2004). Also, as mentioned previously, men and women still have gaps in terms of hours spent in paid labor and time spent in unpaid labor at home. Thus, while there might be a theoretical shift that could recognize a separation of mothering and mother, this shift does not seem to be terribly present in most realms of family life.

As noted previously, there continues to be a divide between mothers and fathers and hours engaged in carework, as well as ideologies surrounding work and parenting that differ for mothers and fathers. These divisions and assumptions are problematic in a number of ways, but what is significant here is that this distinction between mothering and fathering behaviors did not occur in the Disney films that were analyzed. Key parenting behaviors that were evident in the films were socialization, emotional comforting and protecting, offering guidance, and basic care needs. Parental figures helped younger characters understand social norms, values, and customs. For instance, in *The Jungle Book*, Bagderha tries to explain to Mowgli why the jungle is no longer a safe place for him and works to ensure Mowgli understands how others see the role of humans in the world. Jasmine's father in *Aladdin* and Tiana's mother in *The Princess and the Frog* encourage their daughters to find suitable husbands rather than risk a life as single women. Before his death, Mufasa tries to teach Simba about the territory he rules over and how the nature of their rule maintains order. Merlin, too, in *The Sword in the Stone*, acts as an important teacher and tries to socialize Wart despite his periodic annoyance with the boy.

Parenting behaviors portrayed in the films also included emotional comforting and protector of younger children. Cinderella's fairy godmother comforts her as she was crying in the garden. Dumbo's mother, too, engages in emotional comforting as her young son is upset by his separation from her after she is essentially jailed for trying to protect her baby. Mulan's father also comforts her; for example, he

consoles her after things went poorly at the meeting with the matchmaker. In *Bambi*, both his mother and father act in ways to protect the young Bambi from harm. A key part of King Triton's role in *The Little Mermaid* is protecting Ariel, and Mufasa in *The Lion King* dies trying to save Simba from the wildebeest stampede. The fairy godmothers in *Sleeping Beauty* also act as protectors of Aurora, as does Mushu in *Mulan*. In other films, however, this role of parent protecting child is reversed; in *Beauty and the Beast*, Belle goes to live with the beast in order to free her father and Mulan goes to war to prevent her father from doing so.

Many parental figures engaged in dispensing advice and offering guidance to the younger characters to varying degrees of success. Sometimes advice was sought out as with Pocahontas and Mother Willow, while others grew out of a situational reaction such as Mrs. Potts giving advice to Belle. Similarly, after Wart was crowned King, he mentions that he wished Merlin was there, presumably for his advice and companionship during those tumultuous times. Mama Odie in *The Princess and the Frog* is another example of a character who offers guidance during a stressful time.

The one area of parenting behavior in which gendered divisions were most evident was in the basic caregiving of the child or adolescent. Parental figures did engage in basic caregiving, such as feeding, bathing, and dressing, but these behaviors were more likely to be performed by mothers than fathers. For instance, in *The Lion King*, Simba's mother is seen bathing him while his father is the one who shows him how to pounce, which would be an important method of securing food outside of the home (despite the fact that female lions are the species' hunters). Also, in *The Jungle Book*, while the wolf father had the authority to allow the boy to stay with the wolf family, it was the wolf mother who tended to the boy's care. These differences in caregiving behavior seem to mimic the gendered division in paid labor outside of the home and unpaid labor within the family structure we discussed earlier. It seems that basic, mundane, day-to-day caregiving continues to be devalued and relegated to the mothers, if and when they appear. It is also important to note that very few characters are shown as infants or very young children, so to some extent they may not need too much assistance with caregiving activities such as bathing and dressing.

Discussion

For Disney, parenting behaviors, such as basic caregiving, advising, protecting, and teaching, seem to come from a variety of sources, not solely the biological mother or father. *Dumbo* featured the best example of a biological mother engaging in multiple positive caregiving activities, yet Mrs. Dumbo had relatively little screen time and a rather minimal role in the movie. In the Disney films analyzed, fathers tend to have more significant roles than mothers; in nine films, fathers had more significant roles than mothers (see Table 3). Of the remaining six films, one included an adoptive mother (*Lilo and Stitch*), two included negative portrayals of the stepmother (*Cinderella* and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*), one included a biological mother whose role was quite minor (*Dumbo*), and the remaining two did not include a biological or adoptive parent of the main character (*The Jungle Book* and *Aladdin*). Given the cultural significance of biological mothers and Disney's place as a cultural story-teller, the treatment of biological mothers in Disney films is remarkable.

As noted previously, the analysis included films with original release dates spanning 1937-2009. Patterns of family formation and parenting behaviors have certainly shifted during that time period. The delay of marriage, the increase of births to single mothers, and shifts in maternal employment have been significant. Parenting ideologies, too, have shifted; although intensive mothering has been powerful throughout this time period, it has transformed to reflect tensions with employment, and ideals of fathers have shifted from an emphasis on breadwinning to also incorporating active involvement. However, when looking at these films and date of release, there does not seem to be a clear-cut pattern of parental involvement over time. Looking only at the eight films released since 1989, there is a greater portrayal of father figures in these films; six of these eight films included a father figure, compared with only three of the seven released prior to 1989. While biological fathers have appeared to increase in prominence over time with them being portrayed in all but two films in the sample in the last twenty years, biological mothers did not experience a similar trend. Prior to 1989 only three films included a biological mother; likewise, after 1989, three films included biological mothers. Other-parents seem to have a consistently

important role throughout this span of time. It is notable that given the significant changes in family formations over this period, relatively little has changed in relation to who cares for the kids within Disney classic films.

Considering the time range of the release dates of these films, it is important to consider the socio-historical constructions of parenting. For instance, Plant (2010) discusses transformations in motherhood during the period between World Wars I and II. Victorian motherhood shifted to a scientific motherhood, and tensions existed with regards to women having too much of a role in raising sons. Victorian motherhood suggested that motherhood was a full-time role and that mothering required suffering and sacrifice, but mother-blame indicated that over-mothering was the root of many social issues (Plant, 2010). Kimmel likewise analyzes responses to the feminism in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century and suggests that some men “opposed the perceived feminization of American culture” (1987, 262). Women’s “perceived parental monopoly” (278) continues to be challenged by men’s rights groups (Kimmel, 1987). Perhaps part of Disney’s lack of biological mothers is a product of cultural periods in which mothers were seen as having too much control and power. However, this does little to explain the role of other-parents.

Along with the lack of positive, significant biological mother characters, the presence of other-parent figures is also captivating. While dominant parenting discourses tend to neglect the networks of people involved in caring for and mentoring youth, it is surprising that these figures are so prominent in Disney films. While other-parents are not always clearly defined, it is interesting that Disney has shifted significance from biological parents and onto other characters. Despite the ambiguity associated with defining other-parents, parenting narratives in Disney films illustrate the impact that others have on child development. A more ideal depiction of other parents, mentors, and general networks of caregivers could include more positive and active portrayals of biological parents, but the inclusion of caregivers beyond biological parents remains intriguing.

Social class and racial differences did not seem to impact the presence of other-parents. For instance, in *The Princess and the Frog*, Tiana is both African American and from a poorer social class, yet

her parents were married and portrayed positively. Aladdin is the only other character that stands out as being from a lower social class standing, and in that film, neither biological parent is present. There is a significant amount of racial and ethnic variety, particularly in more recent films, but the portrayals of parenting do not seem to be impacted. Thus, in these films, intensive mothering is almost non-existent, even if the character seemed to fit with white, middle-class norms.

Many parenting behaviors are evident throughout the Disney films included in this analysis. These behaviors included day-to-day caregiving activities such as feeding and bathing, teaching younger characters important norms and values, emotionally comforting the younger characters and offering protection to them, and acting as important sources of advice. With the exception of the basic care needs being relegated to women, we begin to see a picture of those who care for kids as “caregivers”. These behaviors display many of the most common narratives that are upheld as ideal in the modern discourse of parenting; in some ways, Disney fathers are similar to the new father ideal of involved fatherhood.

Upon further reflection it is interesting to note that none of these feature films represent sequels or continuations of previous stories building upon older tales. In an industry where worlds and characters are reused and recycled for profit, it is noteworthy that Disney princesses and princes never become Disney mothers and fathers. While the implication of most “happily ever after” films suggests that the female and male lead get married, whether they will continue to uphold traditional family structure by having children is never answered. In this sense, it seems much of what Fiske suggested in 1987 remains true today, once a woman is no longer romantically available she serves little purposes to the narratives we find most compelling. It would be interesting if future inquiry attempted to determine how the narratives play out in the sequels that do come out, which usually take the form of direct-to-video release.

As with any subject of study, Disney’s stories are subject to external social forces as well. At the end of 2010 the studio announced that it would not be using fairytales as the basis for its movies for the foreseeable future (Chmielewski & Eller, 2010). Citing a desire to move towards movies with broader appeal in a bid to increase profits by reaching across gender and age groups, it is unclear what this means for the role of mothers within Disney products. And while steps have been taken to break away from the

formulas of the past, Disney still has a large catalogue of gendered characters and storylines that will not be erased by the presence of a handful of new movies.

Future research on parenting and media should include other media giants and other media forms. For instance, this analysis only includes Disney's hand-drawn feature-length animated films. While purposeful, this also limited the study in some ways. Films with more progressive storylines produced by Pixar, which use computer generated images (CGI), such as *Cars*, *Monsters, Inc.*, *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo*, and *A Bug's Life*, were not included but warrant deeper exploration and comparison. To illustrate, Brydon (2009), using a feminist approach, explored mothering themes in *Finding Nemo* and made suggestions about the impact of men mothering in newer children's media. Subsequent research should also develop a stronger operational definition of other-parent figures. Given their prevalence in this study, it is apparent that this has been an overlooked aspect of families in media.

We should note that, despite its reputation as a conservative company, Disney movies have made large strides in the variety of portrayals for those engaging in caregiving behavior. While the ideal model of dramatic storytelling may involve children leaving the purview of their parents' home, Disney has compensated to an extent by emphasizing the importance of family and offering young adults other characters who continue to guide them and care for them. These narratives recognize that young people are often looked after by a variety of individuals, something the intensive mothering model tends to neglect. On the one hand, Disney neglects or oversimplifies the role of biological mothers, yet, these films do recognize fathers as active in parenting as well as the role of other-parents. It is a discourse that family scholars should be aware of and continue to explore in more depth in order to understand how parenthood and parenting are culturally presented in media forms. It is also significant in the implications for developing a stronger social narrative regarding it "taking a village" to raise a child. While some have supported and have had life experience that fits with this approach, many middle class mothers still rely on intensive mothering ideology. Thus, perhaps Disney films can be a bridge to recognizing the benefits of having multiple caregivers for children.

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Table 1. List of Disney Films in Sample

Title	Year Released
<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i>	1937
<i>Dumbo</i>	1941
<i>Bambi</i>	1942
<i>Cinderella</i>	1950
<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	1959
<i>The Sword In The Stone</i>	1963
<i>The Jungle Book</i>	1967
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	1989
<i>Beauty And The Beast</i>	1991
<i>Aladdin</i>	1992
<i>The Lion King</i>	1994
<i>Pocahontas</i>	1995
<i>Mulan</i>	1998
<i>Lilo And Stitch</i>	2002
<i>The Princess and the Frog</i>	2009

Notes: Bolded films were used for inter-rater reliability.

Table 2. Types of Mother and Father Figures Appearing in Sample Films

Film	Gender of Child/Adolescent	Mother Figures		Father Figures		Other-Parent Figures
		Biological Mother	Step/Adoptive Mother	Biological Father	Step/Adoptive Father	
<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i>	F		X			
<i>Dumbo</i>	M	X				Timothy
<i>Bambi</i>	M	X		X		
<i>Cinderella</i>	F		X			Godmother
<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	F	X		X		Godmothers
<i>The Sword In The Stone</i>	M				X	Merlin
<i>The Jungle Book</i>	M					Bagderha
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	F			X		Sebastian
<i>Beauty And The Beast</i>	F			X		Mrs. Potts
<i>Aladdin</i>	M					Genie
<i>The Lion King</i>	M	X		X		Pumba, Timon
<i>Pocahontas</i>	F			X		Mother Willow
<i>Mulan</i>	F	X		X		Mushu
<i>Lilo And Stitch</i>	F		X			
<i>The Princess and the Frog</i>	F	X		X		Mama Odie

Table 3. Parental Figure With Highest Prominence

Film	Prominent Parental Figure
<i>Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs</i>	Stepmother
<i>Dumbo</i>	Mother
<i>Bambi</i>	Father
<i>Cinderella</i>	Stepmother
<i>Sleeping Beauty</i>	Father
<i>The Sword In The Stone</i>	Adoptive father
<i>The Jungle Book</i>	
<i>The Little Mermaid</i>	Father
<i>Beauty And The Beast</i>	Father
<i>Aladdin</i>	
<i>The Lion King</i>	Father
<i>Pocahontas</i>	Father
<i>Mulan</i>	Father
<i>Lilo And Stitch</i>	Adoptive sister
<i>The Princess and the Frog</i>	Father

Appendix 1. Guided Questions:

1. Who is the main character?
 - a. Is s/he a child/adolescent?
 - b. Are there other important characters? How are they connected to the main character?
2. Is a mother figure represented?
 - a. If yes, is she a biological mother, step mother, or othermother figure?
 - i. How is she represented?
 - ii. Does the mother figure have a prominent role?
 1. Is she a central character?
 - iii. What are the characteristics of her interactions with the child figure?
 - b. If no, is she absent? Why?
3. Is a father figure represented?
 - a. If yes, is he a biological father, step father, or other-father figure?
 - i. How is he represented?
 - ii. Does the father figure have a prominent role?
 1. Is he a central character?
 - iii. What are the characteristics of his interactions with the child figure?
 - b. If no, is he absent? Why?
4. Compared to the father figure, is the mother:
 - a. A positive role model? Nurturing?
 - b. Equally involved in the child/adolescent's life?
 - i. How much time does the father/mother figure spend on screen?
5. Discuss family interaction in the film.
6. What is the main plot of the film?
 - a. How does family relate to the plot or move the plot ahead?
 - b. How is the mother/father figure(s) involved in the plot?